

“THE GREAT TRANSITION”

DEATH AND DYING

INTRODUCTION

I was tending my garden this morning. The weather is promising to become ‘very hot’ once again so, out came the hose and I began the task of frisking the flowers, refreshing the foliage, ‘renewing’ the roots, and safeguarding the ground from the worst that an Australian summer can inflict upon the long-suffering soil.

In surveying the inhabitants of my garden in their various plots and pots, I set to wondering about the health of these plants—so diverse, yet living together in remarkable harmony! I think my garden, in the main, needs a ‘doctor’.

My garden is dying! The lawn ceded its sovereignty during the great drought and has failed to fight its way back to health. The plot containing that impressive line of agapanthus, however, has strutted its stuff from early spring and has drawn admiring glances from passers by and friends intent on visiting my dwelling place. I see them there, marching in military precision up the garden path. I ‘salute’ them as I pass by!

The roses have stolen our hearts, of course. Some of my favourites have raised their 'arms' in praise of life and set within their 'hands' these blooms to glorify their prized position near my front window! Soon, there will have to be a savage beheading—the natural outcome of all things beautiful.

Sad story, though, is the pelargonium arena. These plants have had their day. I'd better start again, give that plot another 'look'.

I should never have planted the azaleas so far into the sun's burning rays yet there they are, smiling sweetly as ever. They bloom twice yearly—in spring and autumn. How amazing. It is as though these plants, taken out of their natural habitat, have given themselves to the mission of declaring witness to that which thrives within them for the sake of the 'world' in which they live. I must admit, however, that those planted just last year in a predominantly shaded area are suffering greatly the effects of sunburn!

If I were intent on setting up a parable here, my purpose would be to express appreciation for all those who have responded to a call to minister God's grace on foreign soil. (Perhaps I have for many who remain in the confines of 'home ground' do not make the effort—nor feel it necessary—to share their faith and live for God)!

**Yes, the garden is showing its age.
Even the agapanthus is going to seed. Where do I
find vibrant life this side of my garden gate?**

**Don't be concerned, for there is yet life in me.
And, there is still life in my garden—in the root
systems, the trunks, the stems, the branches, the
leaves (green and shining in the sun), and in the
flowers that remain.**

But, there are signs of death in the garden.

**Don't be perturbed, for there are also seeds in the
garden! You should see the agapanthus!**

***'Hundreds, thousands, millions'—
(to quote a good friend to us all)!***

What have I gleaned from my garden today?

STUDY 1 THERE IS LIFE IN THE GARDEN

Living life to the full

***'Make my heart a garden wherein flowers may grow
...'* where on Earth could I have found those
words?—from my dim, distant past! I sang the song
as a child yet the words seem more appropriate for
today! My garden is a metaphor of my life.**

Springtime is for sprouting, for greening, for growing, and for blossoming. All life needs its beginnings. Yet, it has been said that from birth, we begin to die.

One might say, then, that death is a process yet, so is life! It could be said that all of life will lead to death. But, I dare to say that death will lead us to life!

How can I submit that thought to your thinking? My garden has taught me this truth and, so has a greater Teacher than the parables that abound in my garden plots!

Jesus said:

'Unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it will remain alone. But, if it dies, it will produce much fruit,' (its inner life will continue living affectively after the seed goes to ground!) **Matthew 20:24.**

What caused Jesus to speak like this concerning death and dying?

See John 12:20-26.

Why would Greeks find themselves among the pilgrims intent on worship in Jerusalem? Notice Philip and Andrew. Philip took the Greeks' request to Andrew. Why?

'The hour has come.'

What could have been the reason Jesus knew that it was now the time for Him to die?

Consider the paraphrase appearing above in the Matthew 12:24 quote: *'its inner life will continue living effectively after the seed goes to ground'*.

Is there a purpose, then, in death?

I love life and, no doubt, so do you. What could Jesus have meant? (v.25)

Where is Jesus?

Consider living where Jesus lives. (v.26).

What could be the honour due to those who live for God?

Living life for others

These notes alluded to the possibility of a parable in the rare occurrence of azaleas blooming in profusion in 'foreign climes', and of those who fail to realise their full potential.

The azaleas now claim the ground of parable for this first study is concerned not so much with death and dying but of living the abundant life!

It may well be that those who must observe the progress of death in the waning life of a family member, a friend, or colleague, know a greater concern of *seeing* pain rather than feeling it; know a greater distress than the one negotiating the final days and hours; know a greater grief than the one who realises that the end is near.

**What does one do, what does one say?
How does one act?
How does one assist in the post-death responsibilities?**

These are questions that we all must face in given circumstances. There are helpful ways, and there are thoughtless ways of approach, where the dying needs to comfort the living!

What does the Bible tell us? We've heard of Job's 'comforters', of course:

See Job 2:11-13 and 3:1-5

The comforters meet and agree to go and sympathise with Job, yet they say absolutely *nothing* for a whole week!

What may one say in the presence of pain?

Of what worth is *'O, you poor dear!'* or, *'Look on the bright side ...'* *'You must have done something wrong ...'*

How do we get beyond inane comments?

What is the value of 'sitting with' the dying (for the dying, and the living)?

Note how Eliphaz decides to 'comfort' Job: 4:1-9.

What are his major mistakes?

Then, there's Bildad. See Job 8:1-7.

How wrong is he about Job, and about God?

Next, Zophar rushes in where fools fear to tread!

See, for example, Job 11:1-20.

How wrong is Job?

How 'right' is Zophar? How wrong is Zophar?

Is there a place to speak of death with the dying? Is there a place to speak of LIFE with those facing death?

See John 5:24-30.

What do these verses say to *you*?

What did Jesus mean by His words recorded in v. 24?

Living life in view of eternity

We are not finished with what John recorded of Jesus' speech in John 5:24-30.

What does Jesus mean by His words about having *already* passed from death to life?

Normally, we would consider life to be bounded by birth and death. Beginning ... End ... That's it!

**Could there possibly be something *before* birth?
See what the Psalmist has to say about this issue:
Psalm 139:13-18.**

What are the most startling aspects of these verses?

What do they say, for instance, about abortion, about the killing of a foetus?

Could there possibly be some form of life *after* death?

What really is the meaning of the final clause in John 3:16?

Do we HAVE eternal life? Now???

**Consider the reality of living in Christ's Kingdom
NOW!**

What has this to do with John 3:16?

**What is the feasibility of 'the flesh' being all that
there is?**

**What would it mean for you if 'the flesh' were
nothing but the 'mud hut' of the human soul?**

What is left when 'the seed' returns to the soil?

STUDY 2 THERE IS DEATH IN THE GARDEN

There is death in the garden

More to the point, there is evidence of the approach of death. Health is not good. Decisions are being made as to how long life can be sustained.

When is the plant to be pulled? When do I dig out the roots? And, where will the dead wood go?

‘Death is the unspeakable word of the 20th and 21st centuries—the great taboo! It is not on our agenda of subjects to be discussed. Leave it in the cupboard. Put it in the file labelled ‘something I must think about sometime’.

Death, however, approaches us all though we know not the day or the hour.

One is given, of course, to think that many deaths do not land on our doorstep at a ‘set time’ for, what of war? What of disease? What of accidental death?

God does not sit on His heavenly throne with a stopwatch in His hand ready to pounce on humankind!

There is a time for death, though, as the Bible outlines. My paraphrase (in verse) of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 underlines the key issues of life and death:

THERE IS A TIME

**There is a time for everything:
There is a time for everything:
A season for all that has been,
A time to search, a time to find,
A time to live, a time to die,
A time to keep, a time to cast,
A time to plant, a time to glean.
A time to tear, a time to mend.**

**There is a time for everything:
There is a time for everything:
A time for death, a time to heal,
A time to speak, a time to cease,
A time to smash, a time to build,
A time to love, a time to shun,
A time to weep, a time to smile.
A time for war, a time for peace.**

**There is a time for everything:
The Lord is Governor of all:
A time to mourn, a time to dance,
He set creation into time,
A time to throw, a time to catch,
He gave us life to tend His world,
Time to refrain, time to embrace.
And live for Him in this our time.**

Some vital issues are raised in this scripture:

For example –

The seasons of life:

Share your life experience of ‘winter’

A time to heal:

Consider: “It is the nature of the body to heal itself.”

How could tears contribute to healing?

A time to mourn:

**What place should the Christian give to mourning?
How does one mourn?**

A time for war:

**When could war be legitimate?
How do wars cease?**

A question for our times:

Is all of life a preparation for death?

Why?

The verses following this well-known section are axiomatic to our theme.

Consider vs 9-15.

After discussing its content, give particular attention to v. 11.

Is not this one of the most delightful texts in all of scripture? It holds the truth of the ages. And, *before* the ages! And, *after* the ages! Think on that!

Let it enter your heart.

In thinking again about God and His ‘fabled’ stopwatch, there is indeed scripture that informs us about God’s timing.

We will be looking at Daniel 8:19, 11:27, and Hebrews 9:27.

While it’s never a good thing to take a text in isolation from its own ‘ground’ (take a text out of context and all that you have is a pretext), these verses may be able, at least, to add some context to our over-all theme.

The texts in question hold eternal truths so, while we cannot go into the specifics here, the phrases *‘the time of wrath’, ‘the appointed time of the end’, ‘an end will still come at the appointed time’, ‘humankind is destined to die and, after that to face judgment’,* demand that something be said about this evidence of an appointed time to die and that, after this, judgment must be faced.

Judgment, especially the judgment of the Lord, has disquieting connotations. But, it need not be so for all judgment is not reserved for the guilty— judgment that ends in the death of the soul. That is, actually, the end of life rather than at the moment the soul leaves the body.

Yes, there is also a judgment for the innocent—it is the judgment to LIFE!

How sure can we be about this?

Hear what Jesus said in Matthew 25:31-46.

It should be noted here that the eternal punishment of which Jesus speaks here is DEATH—the death of the soul!

Now, to return to my garden:

If I am to continue with the parables disclosed in my garden, it becomes important to give thought to those aspects that impact upon the health, or the disease displayed, in the garden environment.

There was the ten-year drought, of course. Then, it was all one could do to save my garden from becoming a desert, from ‘going to the grave’! It’s important, then, to include:

Lack of water

There was a woman who came to draw water from the village well and, taking the hint laid out for her, she asked Jesus for water that would last forever. (Actually, her reasoning was that she wanted the water Jesus had described so she would not have to carry water from the well ever again)!

Jesus' reply is the answer that gives access to eternal life! We should consider this! See John 4:4-26 and vs 39-42.

The Samaritan woman had missed the point entirely until confronted with her 'short-coming'.

Something had to be done about that!

Discuss: the threat of dehydration in the Christian life, and the worth of witness.

Lack of food

**I have not been a good farmer of the soil.
Meagre supplies of fertiliser and mulch have laid
the ground bare of nurture and sustenance. I hang
my head in shame.**

Here, the Bible helps us again.

Consider:

**Psalm 136:25 The source of sustenance for all
living things**

Psalm 146:7 Sustenance other than food

**James 2:14-17 The link between belief and practice,
of faith and action**

**Matthew 25:35, 42 The end of an individual's
'earth' days**

**Reasons for ultimate acceptance or rejection in
God's eyes**

Lack of nurturing

Choking weeds do nothing for a struggling plant.

**One has to be careful that the root system of the
weed does not become entangled with the plant of
your choice for it may be necessary for the two to
grow together until seed-time and harvest.**

**Weeds can overcome the beautiful, cultured plant,
choking out its very life.**

Consider Matthew 13:24-30.

Why do you think that Jesus said, *'the Kingdom of Heaven is like this ...*, rather than, *'the kingdom of God will be like this ...*'

What do we do with the weeds in our life?

Nurture them?

Consign them to the scrap-heap?

What do you think about living in a 'world of weeds'?

Lack of understanding

It is time, certainly, to link the metaphors we have in place with what Jesus said (by use of a garden-style parable) about progress through life, and through death!

Consider Matthew 13:2-9:

What action do the birds represent?

And, what about the stones?

Are we slow to recognise, and deal with, the 'rocky ground' that impedes the growth of our spiritual life?

Think about the thorn bushes that you negotiate each day.

Can you name some?

What about the good soil?

What are the 'ingredients' of that ground?

What 'fertilisers' do you use to enhance the 'soil' of your life?

The approach of death

Death is inevitable. It comes to us all. There are given times in the life of each of us where, except for the intervention of those engaged in the medical profession, looming death could not have been avoided. Science has discovered many life-saving medications and manoeuvres that have enabled us to enjoy a much longer life-span.

Death cannot, ultimately, be avoided though and the Bible enjoins us to be ready, make preparations, and to live each day with a sense of well-being, thankful for life, health, and happiness.

We tend not to speak of death, however. It remains the unspoken (unspeakable) topic though, from time to time, it raises its ugly head to spoil our day.

Now is time to speak of death and dying!

The purpose of these studies is to reveal that death is not all gloom and doom. Within the shadows there are rays of light that break through and give 'heart' to the soul.

Think, for example of that peerless verse in Psalm 23; let me stretch this and paraphrase it for you

‘Even though I walk within the shadow of death, I do not fear what lies ahead because the Lord is with me here, and there. He allows me to lean on His staff and He utilises His rod to keep from me the onslaught of evil and so I am comforted.’

Where do you find comfort when contemplating the thought of death?

What can the staff of the Lord do for you?

What of the rod?

Have you ever asked the Lord to wield His rod for you?(It could save your life, your inner life, that is)!

The fear of death

What is it about death that we most fear?

We may as well face it—the answer may well be ‘the UNKNOWN’.

Death is the very thing that passes the point of *‘it may happen’, it possibly could happen’, and even ‘most probably will happen.’*

Yet, we know so little about death.

Some major questions need to be addressed here.

First, what is death?

The much-acclaimed Oxford Dictionary is hardly helpful!

It states: *the action or fact of dying, the state of being dead.* Then, it gets more technical: *the personification of the power that destroys life... the destruction or end of something.*

Can we do better?

What about: *the moment when the soul leaves the body?*

What is your preferred definition?

Does it do anything to allay fear?

What is the basis of our fear?

Fear of pain, agony, trauma?

That's fair enough.

Does it earn a tick from you?

Fear of negotiating the unknown?

Good enough reason. Is this where you sit?

(But when we die, do we 'travel' towards light or towards darkness?)

That question was resolved for me in a near death experience. Legitimate, actual!

We may come back to this experience as these studies progress).

Fear of what happens next?

Excellent admission.

What do we do about it?

Scripture is of immense value here:
Job is in the extremity of agony. The jaws of death are opening to him. All hope seems lost. Yet it is at a time such as this that he makes the most profound of all statements regarding death, and LIFE, in the annals of human history!

We turn to John 19:25-27

'I know that my Redeemer lives! And, I know that at the end of times, He will stand upon the Earth. And, after the destruction of my body, yet in my flesh I will see God! I, myself, will see Him. I'll see Him with my own eyes! ... How my heart longs for this.'

Note the phrase *'in my flesh'*

The Hebrew text does not indicate whether Job's testimony actually states *in* or *without my flesh*. It doesn't matter!!!

The point is that Job knows that he will see God!

What does that do for *our* faith?

The acceptance of death

Yes, Lord, it's going to happen!
I accept that, and hope to be able to say, on the day, *'I am ready'*!

Now, this actually reminds me that one day a cadet came to me, his training principal, with the news of what happened during his recess period. An Indonesian, he was asked by a cadet friend to accompany him on a holiday in Queensland. All went well except for one escapade. There was a suggestion that it would be nice to include bungy jumping on their itinerary!

The Indonesian was caught up in a dread of what could happen but allowed himself to be ‘strapped into harness’. Was he ready?

He continued his story. ‘At the moment I leapt off the platform I yelled, “I am ready!” My friend thought that I was speaking to him but, Colonel, I was speaking to God!’

It’s nice to be ready today for what might happen tomorrow!

How strong is your ‘harness’?

Paul’s commentary on the matter holds much value for our topic.

Consider Philippians 1:20-24.

Paul’s deep desire was to live for Christ but he was actually looking forward to dying. Remarkable man. Obviously, he knew a lot about the nature of ‘life after death’.

Paul lived through many life/death situations. (His testimony concerning this as recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:17-29 is sufficient for us to wonder if ever we could have pulled through any one of his emergencies. His testimony was not completed until the Lord had His own word: 12:7-10.

In what ways may we learn to rely on the strength of the Lord in our weaknesses?

What did the Lord mean by strength being made perfect in weakness?

The Good News translation states the Lord's words in this way:

'My grace is all you need, for My power is greatest when you are weak,'

GRACE WE NEED AND GRACE IS GIVEN!

STUDY 3 THERE IS TRANSITION IN THE GARDEN

First, it was the flowering cherry: diseased, so deceased!

Then, the magnolia: lack of depth in the soil.

Next, the perennials becoming annuals. (These have been replaced, of course).

The daisies had their day. (I could never warm to the daisies).

The lavenders? How I mourn the lavenders.

My garden is in a state of transition.

Just a moment, it does seem that I appear in closer affinity with some plants than with others. Perhaps this could be taken as a parable of one who finds it easier to sit with some sufferers approaching death than with others.

On the other hand, are we loath to allow some patients to slip into death and try to hang on when there is no hope remaining this side of 'The River', hanging on when all they want to do is to let go.

These studies relate to the great transition that we call 'death'. *'The Great transition'*: this is how I view death.

And, if there is a statement, a contribution, that I can make to the great debate, 'What is death?' it is this:

DEATH IS A COMMA, NOT A FULL STOP

Our life story is not ended at the moment of death.

One could ask, of course, 'What is the moment of death?'

When may it be safely said, 'this person is dead'?

I asked this question once to a large group of medical staff meeting in 'retreat'.

Surprisingly, no one came up with a ready answer. We groped around for a definitive statement.

Is it when breath leaves the body? Not specific enough.

Is it when the heart stops beating? Not definitive enough.

Is it when the brain ceases to function? Ha! We were getting nearer the point.

Finally, we became satisfied with: ‘when there is no longer any response to stimulus.’

That’s when death occurs. We will have then slipped the mortal coils of this life!

Some long years ago, now, the Readers’ Digest published the account of a young girl nearing death. Her parents were sitting silently in the hospital room.

They had already been in a state of grief for many days and, now, the last vestiges of life were seeping from the girl’s body. She had remained in a comatose condition for weeks on end, the heart-monitor emitting the inevitable warning signs.

Suddenly, the lass sat up with a surprised but joyous expression on her face, raising her arms and calling, “Mummy, Daddy, come quick; is this Jesus?” Then, she fell back, dead.

Who could possibly explain what actually happened in that hospital in those last moments of the child’s (earthly) life?

In a series such as this, the touchy subject of ‘near-death’ experiences ought to be given some space.

In our last study I made mention of a personal experience that perhaps needs to be expanded a little more fully.

Having endured many surgeries, I think that I can safely say that—normally—one does not dream, (or have visions for that matter) under anaesthetic. The unconscious is as it is described.

Yet, on one occasion while still in my teens, I was deprived of oxygen due to a blockage in the tube. Finally, I awoke to some expletive language from the surgeon.

He explained what had happened. What he could not have been able to explain, though, would have been the content of the conversation I had while in my unconscious state!

I had become ‘fully conscious’ in another ‘state of being’ with a rushing, mighty wind carrying me along at great speed through deep, deep darkness.

Someone at my side began to give assurance of security. I noticed a pinpoint of light that became much larger as I riveted my attention upon it. I remember asking a question something like, ‘am I being taken to Heaven?’

He answered, ‘We do not know’ (I was now aware of other beings who could not be seen for the darkness),

We are the guides who accompany you but it is the Lord who makes the decision as to whether you come to Him or go back ...'

Everything then went blank. Evidently, the Lord had decided! I awoke to hear the surgeon's colourful comments.

In turning to the scripture, we find that Paul has much to say about such matters.

Consider first, though, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

You will be pleased to note that the GNB uses the word *friends* in v. 1 and the NLB has a pleasing addition to '*brothers*': it is '*and sisters*'. The matter is settled, of course, at the beginning of the letter. Paul is addressing the whole Church at Corinth!

Paul says, '*by this Gospel (this Good News) you are saved.*

What Good News? (See vs. 3-8).

Name the major aspects of the Gospel that Paul outlines.

Which is the most difficult aspect to add to your faith?

What does he mean by, '*fallen asleep*'?

The mention of James is quite significant. Not John's brother, this James was the brother of Jesus! (the son of Mary, but also of Joseph).

James and his other siblings had given Jesus up as a bad case of mental aberration. The meeting mentioned in v. 7 paved the way for a dramatic turn-about! James became the head of the Church in Jerusalem. (He also became the first Christian martyr because of his faith in Christ.)

What caused James' about-face?

Jesus also appeared to Saul of Tarsus who was to become the apostle to the Gentiles (to all non-Jews), the great apostle Paul himself. Paul's turn-about (a very good explanation, by the way, of the word *repentance*—to go in the opposite direction) was every bit as remarkable as that of James.

***'By the grace of God I am what I am'*, is in no way an excuse coming from the lips of Paul, it is a statement of joy, a statement of praise to God!**

The Lord made Paul the man he turned out to be!!!

How much have we let the God of grace do a work of transformation in our lives?

Though the details of this next ‘near-death’ experience will not be told in detail (they are of an immensely personal nature), the outline of the salient points are of great importance when seeking to understand the nature of the transition from Earth to Heaven.

A younger brother of mine had sustained a number of heart attacks, each one with greater ferocity. He had already experienced, in an earlier life-threatening episode, a ‘floating’ sensation where he was enabled to observe the theatre and the doctors at work, during the actual operation as it was being performed on his anaesthetized body.

Such an experience, I’m assured, is not entirely unique and some doctors have endeavoured to explain what was actually happening. As life becomes more and more problematical, the body will focus on the preservation of the brain at all cost to the rest of the body. This sounds, to me, to be perfectly logical.

I do need to make a salient point here. Time was elapsing during that strange encounter I had in my teen-age years. In retrospect, I understand that I had not died during the operation but was, in fact, very near death. The outcome of this story concerning my brother makes it necessary to explain this point.

What is different about this further experience, that my brother described to me privately, will be plainly seen. He spoke, in graphic detail, of how he had asked an ‘Entity’ (his word), what would happen to his family if he died. He was shown a ‘vision’ (again, his word). After describing the vision, my brother then said to me,

“I then knew that everything would be alright!”

Approximately a year later, my brother died. The vision was fulfilled on the day of his funeral though the significance of what I did on that sad day was ‘hidden’ for the time being. If I had remembered what he had said as I set about doing the very thing that he had described, I’m not sure that I could have coped with the emotion that it would have engendered—certainly, my calm demeanour on the day would have been shattered.

I have provided the basic facts of the event in order to emphasise a great truth about the after-life that, otherwise, is not easily recognised. It is this: How could my brother ‘see’ what I would do in a given circumstance before it happened???

He was encountering something not as yet actualised in the realm of time and space. Many months after his death, I recalled the content of his vision and I found myself in a state of shock because of its ramifications.

I was caused to think more deeply about the dimensions of time and space and began to see more clearly the possibility of other dimensions of human habitation beyond this earthly life.

How can we, when caught up in the realm of time and space, imagine that a realm could exist where neither time nor space holds any sway?

Where we live, and move, and have our being, it takes time to go anywhere. Distance keeps us from actual contact and we can do nothing about it until we take the journey in the vehicle of our choice to meet and greet the friend we have longed to see.

How can we possibly think of a realm where neither time nor space applies?

Heaven is not some far away place in a far distant land! We bide our time, and take our journeys, while on Earth but death will sweep us through the 'gates' of the Heavenly Realm without any lapse of time or length, breadth, height, or depth of space!

Time, waiting time, time for patience, time to doubt, time to turn away, has passed.

Heaven is, actually, in the eternal NOW!

With these thoughts in mind, then, let us return to the Scripture:

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:12-20.

Today, many so-called 'Christian' teachers deny that Christ rose from the dead.

What is your reaction to such teaching?

What about the validity of the testimonies of those who met with Him after His resurrection?

What would remain of the Gospel if the resurrection had not taken place?

Where would you and I be—literally, be?

What do you say to people who proclaim that the Christian faith is a delusion?

If faith is a delusion, why would we deserve more pity than anyone else in the world?

The truth is ...! (v.20).

Take time now to write down the factors of your faith. Let it be your testimony!

STUDY 4 THERE IS HOPE IN THE GARDEN

A good friend has just visited me.

And, the first thing that was said after the greeting was, ‘your garden is much healthier than mine!’

We mourned the demise of his garden. And, I looked with restored hope to mine.

He said that my plants are in much better condition; they look more alive. How kind of him. Just what the doctor ordered!!!

Yes, there is hope for my garden.

Not all the plants will be able to survive the next bout of heatwaves, but there are those that will remain.

I have great hopes for the Australian natives of course, and my firm friends, the ‘sun-loving’ azaleas.

Not so the delicate variety in their shady nook! They blossomed reasonably well for a year or two though and I am grateful for what they were able to offer. They gave of their best but are now returning to the soil from whence they came. Their seed should live on.

Take some seeds into your hands.

Choose various sizes, shapes, colours, and see how many you can name.

I doubt if you will find any mustard seed but it is well known that even the smallest seed can become a tree where birds will come to roost and raise their young.

See Matthew 13:31-32.

This parable is a description of the Kingdom of Heaven. Why?

What hope do you have wrapped up, as yet, in its seedpod?

What is the nature of hope?

We will draw on Paul's wisdom again as we home in on our answer.

First, Romans 5:1-8.

The inflow of peace is activated by the assurance of salvation.

Where do we stand, and what is our reaction?

Suffering: what it can do *to us*, and *for us*.

Why should hope not disappoint us?

Consider those who have faced death to protect or save another.

Now, to Romans 8:18-27.

How can hope benefit suffering?

What can creation, nature, teach us?

What does Paul mean by “*the redemption of our bodies*”?

Why would hope that is seen (fulfilled) not be hope anymore?

When we don't know what to say, what to pray, how does the Holy Spirit help us?

What are your thoughts about the Holy Spirit praying for us?

What is the context of our hope?

Allow the Psalms to help us here:

There is a grouping of eight verses in Psalm 119 set under the Hebrew letter samech (which actually means ‘to be sustained’, ‘to stand firm’)

See vs.113-120.

How well these verses relate to their heading!

The Psalmist recognises God to be his refuge and shield.

How does this encourage hope within you?

Acknowledge specific Scripture portions that re-enforce your hope.

***'Sustain me, uphold me ...'* in what ways do you see God answering these prayers?**

***'My flesh trembles ...'* This is not a fear of how God may act against you but how he will act for you!**

This is who makes the flesh 'tingle'. It is enough to turn 'fear' into awe of God.

In what ways does this understanding of the language used increase both faith and hope?

What is the fulfilment of our hope?

It's time to return to 1 Corinthians 15 and now to vs.35-58.

Read the verses through, verbally.

What is your reaction to the vibrancy and confidence that spring from these words?

Where, in this reading, would you be most willing to add a hearty ‘amen’?

What, for you are the difficult parts?

Is it really necessary to know what kind of a body we will ‘wear’ after death?

Think about Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-5) for a moment, and Jesus after His resurrection (John 20:19-20).

Is the matter any clearer?

Quite frankly, we don’t know just how different was the composition of those ‘changed’ bodies!

**However, vs. 42-49 describe this change for us in the best possible way this side of the tomb!
What is the most important verse for you?**

Now, for the ‘mystery’:

(Incidentally, the word *mystery*—at the time of Paul’s writing, did not mean, exactly, what it means now! In the original language (Greek), *mystery* meant ‘this was once a secret but now it has become gloriously obvious. The once hidden is now disclosed!

There's something, still, that is mysterious to our minds, here, because we find it hard to take on board all of Paul's teaching in this section.

What has been made plain, though, is that—after death—we take on a 'new body'. This body will be imperishable, we will become immortal, and DEATH will be done away with! It will be swallowed up in victory!

**So, Death, where is your victory?
Where is your sting, your pain, your inflictions upon us?
Gone! Done away with forever!
Through the grace of God we may now enjoy this victory!**

**Death can no longer bring about our END!
All death can do is to acknowledge defeat. We will be led into our true LIFE, our new beginning. Let nothing move you from your faith, nothing take away your hope.**

Death is a comma, not a full stop!

In conclusion:

A return to I Corinthians 15 – my paraphrased version (in verse) for a confirmation of all we have been sharing together:

VICTORY!

**Christ died because of human sin,
How may the dead be raised to life?
According to God's word;
Just as a seed is sown
He died upon a cross of shame,
Into the waiting soil in death,
For us He shed His blood.
It is transformed! Life won!
The third day He was raised to life:
Though sown as weak, we're raised in power;
He is the Son of God.
Christ's saving work is done!**

**If Christ had not been raised to life,
This is a glorious mystery:
Our faith would be in vain;
We'll all be changed, it's found!
How could we testify, or prove
Within the twinkling of an eye,
The Lord now lives again?
The trumpet call will sound;
If in this life alone is hope,
Then, clothed with immortality,
What solace could we give?
We're in Christ's likeness, crowned.**

**But Jesus Christ has risen indeed,
So where, O death, is now your sting?
The Firstborn from the dead.
And grave, your victory?
Since death had come by just one man,
The power of sin has been destroyed,
By one Man death has fled!
Christ's death is history;
Our Lord will reign forever King:
Now unto God be all the praise,
The Victor over death!
He gives us victory!**

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